

# Heidelberg festival lets contestants act up

Base groups compete for best performance while getting tips from theater experts

BY NANCY MONTGOMERY

Stars and Stripes

HEIDELBERG, Germany — The comedy writer from Chicago was the toughest.

Nancy Beckett, a writer for the legendary Second City theater, didn't pull her punches just because she was critiquing a group from Ramstein Air Base.

Razz-Ma-Tazz Family Theater had just sung and danced for 55 minutes in a production about four dim but kindly animals — a donkey, dog, cat and rooster — who join up to become singers in Bremen, and on the way there, get the best of their four dim but nasty human masters.

"It's a kind of 'Dumb and Dumber' aesthetic," Beckett said, in one of several references to film and criticism, and she instructed the actors and director that "simply to be stupid and mean is a problem in comedy."

But, she said, the production values were high, the makeup impressive. Overall, she said, she wasn't crazy about the play.

"The Wizard of Oz" came to



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mind ... it's obviously very derivative," she said.

The next two critics gushed far more.

"The scarecrow had great authority," said Brid McBride, an Irish freelance art critic.

"Speaking of physicality — what an incredibly physical performance!" said Morrie Enders, artistic director of the Kalamazoo Civic Theatre. "It just kept coming and coming and oozing out.

*"It just kept coming  
and coming and  
oozing out. Boom!  
Just tons of energy!  
So much power  
coming from these  
people!"*

**Morrie Enders**

Kalamazoo Civic Theatre artistic director, speaking after a one-act performance of "The Musicians of Bremen" at Heidelberg's Roadside Theater. Elena Fritz, left, who portrayed one of the play's main characters, "Rooster," received critical acclaim for a "brilliant" performance.

which funds the local community theater groups.

"The goal is to make all the programs in the field stronger," said Jim Sohre, IMA-E entertainment director. "It's really just part of the season of shows in each community. This is sort of a kickoff, to get them training and [to boost] enthusiasm."

The festival, although it provides a couple of days of free, live theater to the public, is really designed to train local actors, direc-

tors, lighting designers and all the other volunteers who compose most local theater troupes.

The groups can watch and learn from each other, as well as from the "adjudicators" flown in and given a small honorarium — no more than \$1,000, Sohre said — for what's a lot of work. In addition there are workshops and other events. This year's festival started Thursday and was to run through Sunday, when winners will be announced.

So it's also a competition.

The three top shows — as judged by Beckett, McBride and Enders, after a secret ballot before they're allowed any discussion of the relative merits of the plays — are recognized. The first-place show gets a chance to compete against those from other regions in the American Association of Community Theater next June in Charlotte, N.C.

There are also awards in acting categories, as well as makeup and other special categories. The winner in the best director category gets two airline tickets to London.

Enders, who has come to the festival as a judge four times, said he sees less competitive jealousy among the military groups than civilian counterparts in the U.S.

"The folks here really enjoy their theater and they milk every last bit of goodness from the experience."

E-mail Nancy Montgomery at: montgomeryn@estripes.osd.mil